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ABSTRACT

Children frequently must adapt to changes in their environments, such as school transitions. The different types of social support from different sources were examined here so as to determine the processes by which such support mediates the stress of school transitions. Students' perceptions of the types or amount of support they received from parents, friends, and teachers, and whether or not different types of support mediated school transition in different domains, were highlighted. Sixth-grade students (N=95) were followed as they made the transition and adjustment to junior high school. Students completed a series of questionnaires evaluating the strength and types of social support they received from three major sources: peers, parents, and teachers. The types of support examined included informational, tangible, emotional, and social companionship support. Results indicate that parents provided more tangible support than teachers and friends and more emotional support than teachers. Informational support from friends best predicted social adjustment to seventh grade which indicates that having friends who provide help coping with problems is an important predictor of group integration and personal intimacy. Findings indicate ways in which social support mediates stress in early adolescence. Contains 12 references. (RJM)

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The Role of Social Support in Mediating School Transition Stress

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether students perceived differences in the types or amount of support they received from parents, friends, and teachers and whether different types of support mediated school transition adjustment in different domains (e.g., social, emotional). Students ($\underline{N}$ = 95) completed questionnaires in April (sixth grade), September and December of seventh grade. Students perceived the most support from parents, then friends. Peer support predicted social adjustment to junior high school. The findings provide an initial step toward understanding how social support mediates stress in early adolescence.

The Role of Social Support in Mediating School Transition Stress

Overview and Background

Children frequently are faced with changes in their environment to which they must learn to adapt. School transitions are one of these changes. The transition from elementary to junior high school has received a great deal of attention because it is the first school change for most students, and it occurs at a time when early adolescents are dealing with stress from a number of changes (e.g., social, academic, biological; Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford & Blyth, 1987). Additional stress results from the change in academic structure (e.g., larger schools and changing classes; Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984).

In the past five years there has been increased attention to the role social support plays in mediating the stress of the transition. Cobb (1976) defined social support as "information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations" (p. 300). A few researchers have focused on the effects of peer support on students' social, emotional, and cognitive adjustment to junior high school (e.g., Hirsch & DuBois, 1992) but the results have been inconsistent. A major criticism of this body of work is the lack of consensus defining and measuring social support. A second concern is the exclusion of alternate sources of support in these studies. Researchers have demonstrated that parents are more influential than peers during early adolescence and school personnel also have been considered significant sources of help and influence for young adolescents (e.g., Berndt, Miller, & Park, 1989).

The Present Study

This study examined different types of social support from different sources to determine the processes by which social support mediates the stress of school transitions. Sixth grade students were followed as they made the transition and adjustment to junior high school. Students completed a series of questionnaires evaluating the strength and types of social support they received from three major sources: peers, parents, and

teachers. The types of support examined included informational, tangible, emotional, and social companionship support. Research indicated that this differentiation is a reliable and valid means of examining the subtypes of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Ratings of stress experienced, and measures of social, emotional, and academic adjustment also were collected.

The first purpose of the study was to determine whether students perceived any difference in the type or amount of support they received from parents, friends, and teachers. Parents were hypothesized to provide the most tangible and emotional support while peers would provide the most social companionship support (c.f., Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). The second purpose was to determine whether different types of support mediated adjustment in different domains. It was predicted that social companionship from peers would mediate social adjustment following the transition to junior high school and emotional support from parents and friends would mediate emotional (anxiety, self-esteem) and academic adjustment (grades, attendance).

Method

Subjects

Ninety-five sixth grade students (mean age 141.82 months, 50 female) from four elementary schools participated in the first testing session. Questionnaires were completed three times: in April (sixth grade); in September (seventh grade) when the stress of the transition was anticipated to be high; and in December when the students were familiar with their schools. In September, 75 subjects (41 female) were available for follow up in two junior high schools. At the third testing session, 72 students (40 female) completed the questionnaires. All subjects had parental permission to participate in the study.

Procedure

Testing was done during school hours in the classroom or other quiet areas of the school (e.g., empty lunchroom, library). At least two examiners were present during

completion of the questionnaires to answer questions or help students who needed assistance. Students completed the questionnaires in approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

Measures

Social support. Four types of social support were measured: informational support which refers to help defining, understanding, and coping with problematic events; tangible support which is the provision of resources or services necessary to help solve practical problems; emotional or esteem support, the information that a person is esteemed and accepted; and social companionship, spending time with others in leisure or recreational activities (Berndt, 1989; Cohen & Wills, 1985). The Scale of Available Behaviors (SAB) was used to measure the first three types of support (Dubow & Ullman, 1989). The items of the scale were modified for this study to specify the source of support. For example, the item "How often does somebody cheer you up when you are sad?" became three questions replacing "somebody" with "a friend", "a parent", or "a teacher".

Social companionship support was measured using the companionship/social integration subscale of the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Children are asked how much the relationship quality occurs in the three different relationships.

Social Adjustment. The Relational Provisions Loneliness Questionnaire (RPLQ) was used to assess loneliness within the context of peers (Hayden-Thomson, 1989). Two subsets of loneliness, group integration and personal intimacy were measured.

Emotional Adjustment. Two areas of emotional support were measured: self-esteem and state anxiety. The general subscale of Harter's Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 1982) was used to measure self-esteem. The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAIC; Spielberger, 1973) was used to measure state anxiety.

Academic Adjustment. Grades and attendance from the final term of sixth grade and the first term of seventh grade were culled from school files.

Results

After each testing session, type by source (4 X 3) repeated measures ANOVAs revealed significant interactions (*Fs* > 40.60, *ps* < .001). Tests of simple main effects indicated that at all three test times students rated their parents as providing significantly more tangible support than their friend and teachers (*ps* < .01). Students also rated their parents as providing significantly more emotional support than friends and teachers in sixth grade, and more emotional support than teachers but not friends in seventh grade (*ps* < .01).

Friends were hypothesized to provide the most social companionship of the three sources of support. At the second testing session, friends were rated as providing significantly more social companionship than parents and teachers but only more than teachers, not parents, at the first and third test time (*ps* < .01).

On each type of support, teachers provided the least amount of support compared to students' friends and parents. Examining the four types of support, teachers provided significantly more emotional and informational support than social companionship or tangible support at each test session (*ps* < .01).

Social companionship from friends was hypothesized to predict social adjustment after the transition to junior high school. Stepwise regression analyses indicated that students' sixth grade ratings of the informational support they received from friends was the only significant predictor of loneliness measures at the third test time (R-squareds > .195, *ps* < .001). Informational support from parents and teachers minimally predicted esteem and anxiety ratings, respectively, in the seventh grade (R-squared = .109 and .098, *ps* < .008). And no social support variable significantly predicted seventh grade attendance or grades.

Discussion

The first purpose of this study was to determine whether students perceived any differences in the type or amount of support they received from parents, friends, and teachers. Parents are very important sources of support for these early adolescents. Parents were rated as providing more tangible support than teachers and friends and more

emotional support than teachers. Friends were not significantly different from parents on the amount of emotional support they provided in the seventh grade testing sessions. This lack of difference in emotional support provided by parents and friends likely reflects the increased degree of intimacy and sensitivity to others' need that develops in adolescent friendships (Berndt, 1989). However, parents and friends differed only at the second testing session on provision of social companionship, indicating that parents are still important social companions for early adolescents.

The second purpose of this study was to determine whether different types of support mediated adjustment in different domains. Informational support from friends best predicted social adjustment to seventh grade, not social companionship as was hypothesized. Thus, having friends who provided help coping with problems is a more important predictor of group integration and personal intimacy (i.e., social adjustment) than merely spending time with friends. Given the increased sophistication of early adolescents' friendships, it is reasonable to assume that adolescents require more psychologically intimate relationship qualities to feel socially adjusted than simply time spent together.

Neither emotional nor academic adjustment was well predicted by the measures of social support. There may be other variables that mediate the relationship between support and emotional and academic adjustment. For example, parental support may encourage studying which in turn afftects academic grades. Also, the sample size was small therefore with more subjects the effects may be greater. Further research using a larger sample and including other variables that may mediate the relationship between social support and emotional and academic adjustment may clarify this area.

The findings from this study provide preliminary evidence that specific types of support affect certain adjustment measures following a stressful event. With further research, it may be possible to determine some of the processes involved in stress mediation. Understanding these processes would provide a conceptual basis for further understanding the role social support plays in the lives of early adolescents.

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